

"THE STORY OF OUR LIVES FROM YEAR TO YEAR"

# ALL THE YEAR ROUND

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## THE WICKED WOODS OF TOBEREEVIL.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "HESTER'S HISTORY."

### CHAPTER VI. MISS MARTHA MAKES A PROMISE.

MAY had suddenly stepped from dream-land into a world of reality and bustle. What business could have brought so many people together? Who could have built so many houses; and how did each person know his own? The best novelty of all, and the one which she had most leisure to examine, was the great tall boy who had untied her bonnet-strings, and who was looking at her and talking to her, as if she had been some one of importance—a grown person at least—instead of being only little May from Monasterlea. In a world where such people as this were to be found there was no knowing what one might expect. Since the shock of her disappointment in Katherine from Camlough her imagination had been empty of an idol. Her heroine had vanished; but now, behold a hero! May, with a well-piled plate before her, folded her little hands under the table, and sighed—a sigh of ineffable joy, whose flavour was so high as almost to take away her appetite.

Paul found May a most unusual little person. He wondered if it was her age that made her so pleasant to him. She was not at all grown up, and yet was far from being a baby. He had never known a girl of this age before. It seemed to him that he had never even passed one in the streets. All the rest whom he had seen were either grown-up women or children. But this one was child enough to be petted and treated without ceremony, yet woman enough to be a desirable com-

panion. Her laugh was so pleasant, and she was not afraid to talk, and she had such very lovely purple-coloured eyes!

Mrs. Finiston said: "And this is the little Italian!" kissed May, held her off and looked at her, and kissed her very heartily again. But after this she had no eyes nor ears for any one save Martha. "It was on Martha that her eyes had longed to rest. She had wished for, and been almost hopeless of, this visit. She had much to say to this friend. She could not set out for the other world without first opening her heart to her. She might have written to Martha, was in the habit of writing to her. She told her punctually that Paul was an inch taller, and that butter was very dear. But a gnawing anxiety was still stored up in that heart which so protested that it must rid itself of a burden. She had waited and waited, hoping for this chance visit. It is so much easier for a woman to explain herself to a friend, while looking in the eyes or holding the hand, than to put a plain statement upon paper.

"Paul," said the mother, "will you take the little girl to see the shops? They will still be open for an hour."

She spoke pleadingly, and turned to urge her petition by a look. But Paul was already tying on May's bonnet.

"Oh, I hope they will not be shut," said the little girl, earnestly; "I have so many things to buy. Beads for Nanny, and ribbons for Bridget, and a cap with strings for Con the fool. He loses all his hats, and gets pains in his ears."

"If the shops be shut," said Paul, "why we shall only have to break in the doors."

"But I should not like you to get into trouble on my account," said May, as they swept down the stairs at a flying pace.

She was divided between her admiration of Paul's prowess and her fears for his safety. "I'd much rather not make any disturbance," said she.

"We shall see," said Paul, mischievously.

The shops were found to be open. Never was there such an expedition of wonder and excitement. Paul led his enchanted companion first into a large boot and shoe shop, and asked for woollen caps with strings for protecting the ears of fools. He next introduced her to a millinery establishment, festooned with bonnets and head-dresses, feathers and flowers, satins and tinsels, the like of which May could not have imagined. And here Paul politely asked for rosary beads "fit for the pious use of old women in the country." May thought it very odd that it should be so difficult to get the things she wanted. After this they went to picture-shops for cap-ribbons, and to a jeweller's for sugar-stick. In the end, however, and after much perseverance, they succeeded in getting all they had been seeking for—and something more besides. For Paul, happening to have, by accident, the price of a pair of new boots in his pocket, recklessly expended half the sum on a cross of bog oak for May. It was handsomely carved, and hung round her neck by a pretty black chain. May was so absorbed and transfixed by gratitude and surprise, that he had almost to carry her over the next two crossings to save her from being run down by the jaunting-cars. And as his mind was rather uneasy about the money, he soothed his conscience by laying out the other half on a pretty new Bible for his mother. He resolved to wear his boots for another half-year. He would send them to the cobbler, and entreat the sullen servant in St. Audrey's-street to give them a little extra blacking every morning for the future. And if all that did not make things right, why then that disagreeable future must e'en take care of itself.

Meantime the two friends in the high room had been occupied in dividing the mother's trouble, share and share alike, between two faithful hearts.

It was nothing very new that Miss Martha had to hear; only the old, old story, with the slight variation of Mrs. Finiston's fears about her boy. The little bit of novelty being a vivid expectation of her own approaching death.

"I know you won't laugh at me, Martha," she said, "though, of course, I do not insist that this may not be a fancy. But you know I have been tolerably brave all my

life. For a sick, lonely woman I have had very few whims. But now I believe that I am soon going to die."

Miss Martha cleared her throat twice before her voice was ready to answer.

"Of course I am not going to laugh at you, Elizabeth. It may, as you say, be a fancy. Very likely. But then, as we have all got to die, it may happen to come true. And you would like to arrange for it, just as if it were going to come true. I approve of that. Be ready for a thing, and it is nothing when it comes. If this appears coming, send for me without the delay of an instant, and I have no doubt at all that we shall help each other. There, now, we have faced it. And that being over, let me remind you that I am older than you, and shall probably die first."

Mrs. Finiston choked back a little flutter of the heart. "I could wish to live," she said, "and I will send for you if there is time. In the mean time, I like to have things settled. There is Paul! Suppose I left him now, he has not a penny nor a friend in the world."

"He is the heir of Tobereevil," said Miss Martha, boldly.

"Martha!" almost shrieked Mrs. Finiston, letting her friend's hand drop in dismay.

"Now, Elizabeth, be quiet. There has been a great deal of nonsense talked about that curse, and I believe that it has worked all the harm. If Simon Finiston had not known that he was cursed he would probably never have been the miser that he is. Weak-minded people will submit to fate. The fascination of being marked out and prophesied over is strong for little souls. They like the eccentricity, and fall in with it, and pander to their morbid expectations. Simon Finiston had as good a chance as any man in the world, and his ruin is upon his own head."

Mrs. Finiston was aghast at this speech. She was so utterly surprised that for a moment she forgot her own troubles. Never before had Martha Mourne been heard to condemn Simon Finiston. But the explanation of this outburst was easy, though poor Mrs. Finiston was too preoccupied to see it at the time. Miss Martha had a fine little morsel of sublimity at the bottom of her simple heart. It may be that at this moment the memory of Simon Finiston, as he had been once, was dearer to her than the reality of young Paul in his present state of youthful undevelopment. But Miss Martha saw the drift of her friend's fears, and her handful of dried sentiment was cast out of the way like a sheaf of old

lavender from a drawer. The future of a young man, she acknowledged, was more precious than an old man's past.

The shock of this surprise over, Mrs. Finiston returned to her own affairs.

"But, Martha, Martha! what happens to one man may happen to another."

"I see no fears for your lad," said Miss Martha. "Unlike his uncle, he has grown up quite apart from the dangerous influence. He knows the evil, yet he has no morbid dread of it. And I see in his eye that he is no shallow soul. My friend, you must commit him to God and to me. If you go first I will try to be Elizabeth. I am not a mother, but it may be that it is in me to act a motherly part."

Mrs. Finiston sobbed, and squeezed the spinster's fingers.

"Well, then, let us see. He will one day be called upon to accept the inheritance of Toberrevil. Do as we will the future will place him in that position. You have prepared him well to receive such a trying stewardship. He will be close to us who are his friends. He will bring a generous ardour to the righting of what is wrong. And you know I am not so credulous as some, and I hold that when a person is striving to do his best, the Lord is very likely to step in and help him."

"It is true," said Mrs. Finiston, with many more sobs; "I have sometimes had dreams like this, but the bitterness of my fears always frightened them away."

"And as I have found you so credulous of prophecies," went on Miss Martha, with increased liveliness of manner, "I will venture to foretell something which the least superstitious may expect to come to pass. One Paul Finiston brought evil into the country. Another Paul shall cast it out. We shall see your boy break this ugly spell upon his race, and begin a reign of peace among our hills!"

Miss Martha wound up this little period with a most unusual note in her matter-of-fact voice. And Mrs. Finiston, carried away by the eloquence of her friend, flung her arms round her neck and wept all the remnant of the tears she had to weep. But in the course of a few minutes this scene was interrupted by the young people bursting in at the door, May flourishing invisible purchases over her head, and calling upon every one to admire them in the dark.

"And, oh, such hunting as we have had!" she exclaimed. "We were in at least ten shops before we could get anything we wanted. And it was so much better fun

than if we had got everything at first. And please, Aunt Martha, do come close to the window and see what a beautiful present he has bought me!"

The entrance of a lamp here revealed Paul's face, which broadly reflected the girl's delight. The mother, who knew the secret of the broken shoes, and the friend who did not, exchanged meaning glances. They said to one another without words:

"This lad is not likely to become a churl or a miser!"

As Miss Martha was going out to her lawyer's next day, Mrs. Finiston put her a question which it may be thought she might have put to her before.

"And now that I have time to think of it, Martha, what is this business that has brought you up to town?"

The answer was hard to give, but Miss Martha was honest, and it came out bluntly.

"My landlord thinks of raising my rent," she said, showing some confusion of manner, "and"—here she was looking anxiously over the table for the gloves which were on her hands—"I do not feel justified in complying with his demand."

Mrs. Finiston knew well who the landlord was. Truly old Simon's disease was progressing.

#### CHAPTER VII. TRYING TO BE ELIZABETH.

MISS MARTHA was right and wrong when she persuaded Paul's mother that her fears of approaching death were unfounded. Three years passed away, and Mrs. Finiston still lived, still languished on her sofa, and paid her son's college fees, and wrote letters to her friend at Monasterlea. But one morning, while Miss Mourne bustled briskly about her breakfast-room, she got the news that Mrs. Finiston was no longer in the world. The end had been quick; there had been scarcely any warning, and little time for reluctance and regret.

Then Miss Martha, reading her letter with red eyes, had reason to remember that she had said, "I will try to be Elizabeth."

She would have remembered it in any case, but the special reason which suggested it came in the form of a message from the dead. It was simply, "Go to Simon," scrawled feebly upon a morsel of paper. The dying hand had been unable to write more.

Well, Miss Martha would go to Simon. She knew all that would have been added to those few eager words had there been time. Miss Martha would go to Simon.

Now Martha Mourne was not romantic. Even in her youth she had been remark-

able for nothing so much as simple common sense. The experience of a long life had done its utmost to make her the most matter-of-fact person in the world. And yet there was something within her that made it difficult that she should go to see Simon of Tobereevil. So difficult that Miss Martha would rather have marched into a battle-field in her neat bright goloshes and best black silk, and taken the few odd chances for her life. It was twenty years since she had seen Simon Finiston. And on the occasion of that last meeting she had broken off an engagement, which had then already lasted nearly a quarter of a lifetime. She had sought him then as she was going to seek him now, had spoken to him, and left him before his own door-step. She was not going to have the blood of the poor upon her head, and their hunger-cry in her ears all her life. If he would persist in walking evil ways, why, then, she must let him walk them alone. She had waited and hoped till suspense had gnawed the pith out of her heart. Now she was going away to mend her wounds, and to fit herself for a life of wholesome labour elsewhere. It was in this way that she had talked to him, and left him, and he had walked his evil ways quite alone ever since. It had pleased her later to come back in her independence and settle for old age within a mile of Tobereevil. But it did not please her to confront this old man who could remind her that certain five years of her life had been full of a light which had failed her, and that other ten years had been racked with the worst grief that can be suffered, the ill-doing and disgrace of one entirely beloved. To save herself from death she would not have entered in at that rusty gate and travelled up that dismal avenue. But she knew very well what she had meant when she had said, "I will try to be Elizabeth."

The unkind March wind was making a jest of her all the time, plucking at her gown, and puffing in her face, and singing out a loud shrill song at her expense, that made the tender buds shiver on the trees. It was as hard upon her as would have been any other raw blustering thing that prided itself on youth, and had no pity upon the romance of a weather-beaten heart. Miss Martha often paused to consider her way, for the trees and the weeds seemed to have eaten up the landmarks which she had known. There were no longer any traces of the broad carriage drive. The branches of the trees hung across the path, and the rabbits scampered

past her feet. Here and there a rusted gate barred her way, while a broken-down fence reluctantly allowed her to proceed. And as she made her way resolutely past all obstacles, there were other things besides the cruel east wind that plucked at her sorely. She remembered how many and many a time she had been used to trip up and down that avenue. She saw the moss-covered trunk on which she had liked to stand to get a favourite view down an arch of the trees, thinking pleasantly all the time of what things she and Simon would do when they should become owners of Tobereevil. They would prune and weed, and till and plant, until the wilderness should be changed into a paradise. They would make the mountains glad, and restore the tarnished honour of the Finistons. Then the desolation of Tobereevil had possessed a weird charm for her, as the haunt of an evil genius which was to be banished one day by the force of her strong goodwill. Then the mansion itself, the mansion which was just now showing a cold grey shoulder between the trees, had been as the castle of an ogre, which was to be charmed into a home of all blessedness and happiness. These had been a young girl's joyful expectations. Yet now all that she looked upon was sunk a hundred times deeper in ruin than it had been in the hour of her hope.

Miss Martha did not dwell upon these thoughts at all. She simply gathered up her wits and her skirts, and held both well in control, as she confronted the sour visage of the house. She remembered it well, she had known it morose, and threatening, and woebegone; but she saw now the marks of twenty years of extra desolation on its front. It had gained an air of surly recklessness, and much of its dignity was gone. There was a savage raggedness about its chimneys, and window-sills, and door-steps, tufted with tall wild grass, and fluttering with streamers of the most flaunting weeds. The greenness of the earth had not been content with eating up the approaches to the walls, but seemed resolved to make its way under the very roof itself.

Miss Martha saw the one cow feeding on the lawn, and the few famished hens that were pecking about the door-step. The door was opened by a dreadful old woman, a mass of rags and patches, whose face was disfigured, apparently, by the grime and discontent of years. This was the wretched old woman who was held in aversion by the country because, for some reasons best



known to herself, she had chosen to devote her services to the miser of Tobereevil; to live a life of starvation under an accursed roof. It was doubtless but seldom that she was required to answer a summons at that inhospitable door. She looked as scared at the wholesome apparition of Miss Mourne, as if she had been suddenly confronted with a whole gang of thieves.

All across the vast and empty stone hall, and away in the chamber where he stood at the moment, Simon Finiston heard wrangling at his door. Old Tibbie's discordant voice echoed among the rafters like the sound of a loud quarrel. Miss Martha's tones did not travel so far, but every harsh note of Tibbie's had an echo of its own, and there might have been an angry crowd upon the door-step.

The miser had been pacing up and down his room, being in a humour more than usually timorous. As he walked he twisted his hands together wildly, and at intervals struck his forehead in the agony of his mind. He was beginning to fear that his memory failed him. He was subject to momentary forgetfulness of the exact position of each tittle of his possessions. Sometimes, for an instant, he could not remember in which pocket he had placed the key of the drawer, in which he kept the key of the closet, in which was hid the key of the desk, where lay safely, under heaps of yellow papers, the key of the safe in which a large amount of money was stored. This noise in his hall alarmed him. There were loaded pistols upon a bench in a corner, and he placed his hand upon one in terror, and looked towards the door. The door opened and Miss Martha came in, having vanquished Tibbie, and sent her growling to her den.

"You need not be alarmed, sir," said she, cheerfully, "I am come to rob you of nothing but a few moments of your time."

Then these two, who had been lovers, looked upon one another.

The old man was tall, withered, and blighted-looking, and so ill-clad, that the blast from the door seemed to pierce him where he stood. It was difficult to believe that he had once been handsome, yet the features were imposing, though hacked and notched by the wrinkles and hollows of the flesh. Once the countenance had been pleasant and bland, but there were snarling lines defacing it now that made one shrink from the creature, shadowy as he was. Time had been when the powdered curls had hung gracefully over the polished forehead, when the complexion had worn a

manly hue above the dainty lace of his ruffles, and when his well-cut profile had looked all the more stately from the becomingness of the quaint and jaunty queue. Time had been when no finer foot and leg had stepped down the country-dance. Now the limbs hung lank and limp, the knees clinging together under the patched and threadbare garb.

A violent fit of agitation seized him as Miss Martha spoke. Amazement, shame, and embarrassment struggled all together in his face. It was not the sight of Miss Martha that had moved him, but the sound of her voice. The twenty years had done their work upon her too, and out of the fogs of his puzzled brain he might hardly have recognised her. She had never been a beauty; only one of those maidens whose temper and wit idealise the homeliness of their features in the eyes of all those who come under their spell. A husband who had married Martha in her youth would have gone on thinking her a beauty till her death; but a lover who had not seen her since her youth would now wonder to find that she had altered into a plain-featured woman. The memory would present her as a person of rare charms, rather than a creature of mere freshness and comeliness, shining with good sense and grace. But Simon knew her by her voice. It echoed yet her steady self-containment and simple goodwill, and now that the sparkle had left her eyes, it was the truest messenger of the spirit still within her.

The narrow soul of the miser was stabbed on the instant by the idea that here was his former love come in person to reproach him, to try to assert something of her olden power, so as to wheedle him into lowering her heavy rent. He could not talk to her face to face, and he would not, and as she was there confronting him, and, being nearest the door, in a way held him prisoner, he instinctively put up a blind which might enable him to hold parley with her at ease.

A look of cunning gleamed out of the confusion of his face, and he became tranquil.

"Pray be seated, madam," he said, with an assumption of benevolence and stateliness. He drew his frail garment around him, and sat down on one of the few old carved oaken chairs that were in the room. To the cushions of these still clung a few fragments of the ruby-tinted velvet, which had made some attempt at covering them when Martha had seen them last. The chilly March sun-gleam flickered down

out of the uncurtained window above his head, and laughed over his chair, and lit up the variegations of his many-coloured robe. The room was sheathed in oak, yet the floor was rotted and broken in many places. The spiders had been at work to make draperies for the windows, and cobwebs were the only hangings on the walls. The ceiling had been painted, but the damp had superadded many pictures of its own, whose rude outlines obtruded themselves among flowers, and hid smiling, fading figures under their grievous blots.

"I have expected this visit," said Mr. Finiston, with a courtly air, while yet Miss Martha was trying to right her thoughts, which had been somewhat thrown awry by the first glimpse of the picture now before her. "You are probably a messenger from my tenant at Monasterlea. A relation perhaps. I had the pleasure of knowing Miss Mourne many years ago, and I see some likeness. A very respectable tenant she is, but pays me such a dreadfully low rent—such a dreadfully low rent!"

He shook his head from side to side with his eyes averted from his visitor, and rubbed his hands slowly, and rocked himself in his chair.

Miss Martha drew her breath hard, and gazed at him fixedly. He would not meet her eyes. In a few moments her amazement abated, and her presence of mind returned. She believed that he had recognised her, but she could not be sure. At all events, either his cunning cowardice or his want of memory might make the task she had undertaken less difficult.

"I need not introduce myself," she said. "It is true I am but the messenger of another. I come from Monasterlea, but not upon the business of your tenant."

"Eh?" asked he, sharply. "Not upon your—not upon her business? What then, madam, what then? Not, I hope, with a story from any of these smaller rascally tenants who want their land for nothing, and would drive a wretched landlord to the workhouse? If you come, madam, about them, I will wish you a good morning on the instant. A good morning, madam. I wish you a very good morning."

He arose hastily and made a grotesque bow, a tremulous, mocking attempt at courtesy, and his face had begun to work with a passion which brought out all those snarling lines upon it.

"Stay, sir," said Miss Martha, and her quick steady tone affected him so that he dropped back nervelessly into his chair.

"I am come, sir, altogether about affairs

of your own," said Miss Martha; "to bring you news. Your brother's wife is dead, Mr. Finiston."

He pricked up his ears and sat bolt upright.

"Well, madam, I should not be surprised. A spendthrift creature who could not thrive. She came here to see me with lace trimmings on her dress. But I told her my mind, and I pointed out the destitution that would fall upon her. I understand that her husband died of starvation, the consequence of his improvidence and her extravagance. They would have dragged me down to want with themselves, but I was much too wise for that. I was always a sparing man, madam, and it is thanks to my economy that I have still bread to eat, and have got a roof over my head."

"I find you are misinformed," said Miss Martha. "Your brother died of fever, and he was a happy man, and a prudent one, while he lived. His wife was a very noble woman, who for years denied herself many comforts in the hope of being able to provide for her son. She has died without fulfilling this purpose, and all her slight means have disappeared with herself. I have come here expressly to tell you that her son is now alone and without means of living. And her son, sir, is Paul Finiston, your nephew and heir."

The old man's face had grown darker and more frightened at every word she spoke.

"Well, well, well," he said, hoarsely, clutching his chair with both hands and gazing now straight at Miss Martha, without thinking of who she was. "Heir, she said, heir. Ay! And pray, madam, who says there is anything to inherit? Barely enough property to keep a man alive, with the expenses of a servant, and a cat to keep down the rats. Would you rob an old man of his crust, madam? Would you take it out of his mouth to give it to a young beggar who can work, madam?"

"That is not what we propose, sir," said Miss Martha, unflinchingly. "We ask you to use a small part of your wealth only to help the poor boy to independence. Even a few hundred pounds——"

A bitter shriek burst from the old man's lips, and he got up trembling in a paroxysm of passion.

"Away!" he cried, waving his hand over his head. "Away! you who deserted me in my need, and now come back to rob me! I will not have you sitting there looking at me. I will not——" He was tottering towards her with his menacing hand, but

poor Miss Martha, cowed at last, here rose in trepidation and fled from the house.

She was too old for tears and lamenting, but she walked home from Tobereevil over miles of ground that had grown infinitely bleaker since the morning. The cold March air seemed to pinch her heart.

"You who deserted me in my need," quoth she, tearfully. "Why; was I not patient? was I not patient?" But Miss Martha would have been ashamed to let her doubts and regrets be known. None were in her confidence but the trees, and the primrose drifts, and the chilly blue peaks of the hills. She complained of nothing when she reached home but a slight touch of rheumatism from that pitiless east wind!

In the evening she was still a little ill from her rheumatism, so it was May who wrote the letter which Martha had meant to write. And young Paul Finiston received the following epistle in his garret:

MY DEAR PAUL,—It is Aunt Martha who is really writing this letter, only I am by accident holding her pen. Aunt Martha wishes to tell you that she has been to your uncle, Mr. Finiston, and that she is afraid he will never do anything to help you, unless you come here to see him, when, perhaps, he might get fond of you. I am very glad that you have nothing to do with him, for he is a dreadful old man, and would not give a crumb to save any one from starving. Aunt Martha begs that you will come here and stay. She will give you a nice little room off the cloisters beside the chapel, and Aunt Martha says you are a great deal too sensible to be afraid of ghosts. She has made some new marmalade, and the garden is full of crocuses. I would like you very much to come, but I think it would be happier for you to earn your own money, and never mind that dreadful old man. Aunt Martha sends you a little note, which she says is a loan from me, and may be useful on your journey down here.

I am, dear Paul,

In Aunt Martha's name,

Your very old friend,

MAY MOURNE.

"How odd that the little one should be wiser than the old woman!" said Paul. This is the way in which people think those the wisest who agree with themselves. "I should like to see her again, but I have no time to stay dallying with children."

Paul was a man of twenty-one now, looking old for his age, and feeling himself thirty-six at least. Of course May was

still the little body in the prim grey pelisse, and with the sweet dark eyes. "Afraid of ghosts! Poor little baby! But she has treated me very honestly, and I will tell her what I am really afraid of." So Paul wrote:

MY DEAR OLD FRIEND,—I received your Aunt Martha's letter, and I approve so heartily of the sentiments of the person who held the pen that I do not intend visiting Monasterlea, nor approaching one inch nearer to my respectable uncle at Tobereevil. I am not quite sure as to whether I could play the part of beggar or not, having never tried, but of this I am sure, that it is best for myself and the old gentleman that some hundreds of leagues of the sea should come between us. Upon nearer acquaintance I might do him some harm. Is there not a prophecy included in that time-honoured curse of our family? I might never be able to forget that I am a kinsman of the miser, and might be tempted to do mischief for the sake of succeeding generations. If you do not understand this, ask your Aunt Martha, and she will explain it to you. Tell her, with my heartfelt thanks, that I am sorry she undertook a painful office for my sake, that I would fain be in the nice little bedroom off the cloisters, but I shall find myself sooner in the rigging of a South American vessel. There is a captain from Liverpool now lying in the docks who will give me my passage for my services. I have here no prospect that I can see, except that of being a clerk or a porter, and I prefer bodily labour in a new country.

And now, my dear little old friend, goodbye. Tell your Aunt Martha that I accept your loan, and will sew it in my coat against time of sickness. Tell her not to count it a bad debt. I commit my mother's grave to her memory and yours. If you keep it in your minds I shall not feel it quite deserted.

PAUL FINISTON.

Paul little thought of the storm which this letter was to create at Monasterlea. Miss Martha turned pale when she read it, and, for the first time in her life, spoke angrily to her niece.

"May! May!" she cried, "what was in that letter? I intrusted the writing of it to you, and you have driven the poor boy across the sea!"

"I did not mean it," said May, weeping. "I only said that I would rather he earned money for himself."

"I told you to write a welcome, and you have warned him away," said Miss Martha.

"Oh, why did I not write myself? The boy will be drowned, and we shall have done it between us. Oh, you cruel, strange girl. Oh, Elizabeth! poor Elizabeth!"

"Aunt Martha!" said May, springing up alert. "Cannot we go to Dublin and stop him?"

"Quick, then!" said Miss Martha. And in another hour they were upon the road.

Arrived in Dublin, they traced Paul from his old dwelling to a humbler lodging. Here they were informed that the young man—a gentleman indeed he was—had left the night before, and gone on board a ship lying at the quay. They hurried down to the quay, disappointed and hopeless, to gaze among the vessels and ask questions. It was early in the morning, and they had been driving over the roads all day yesterday, and all last night. The sun was shining gaily on the bridge as they halt crossed it, and stood leaning over the side. A vessel was moving slowly at some distance, clumsily disengaging itself from the craft around. A faint cheer reached their ears, making them look to this quarter; and May saw Paul on the deck of the moving ship.

"Where, where?" said Miss Martha.

"Oh, Aunt Martha, there! That tall young man with his hat off!"

They left the bridge and hurried along the quay. They came almost alongside of the ship, but it was too far away for anything but signs to pass between Paul and his friends. He had recognised Miss Martha at once, but not so easily the maiden by her side. Her hat had fallen back on her shoulders, her face was flushed with anxiety and grief, her hands were involuntarily extended towards the ship. Paul folded his arms, and gazed sadly at her figure till the ship carried him away, and crowds of tall masts rose up and hid her from his sight. He took her image thus away with him; the loveliest young maiden, he thought, his eyes had ever seen.

#### LEGENDS OF THE KIFFHÄUSER.

"I HAVE a nice little batch of legends from the Kiffhäuser," began Maximilian, "which I need not tell you is the name of a mountain not many leagues distant from Erfurt."

"Come, come," interrupted Edgar, "you are not going to tell us the old story of Peter Klaus, the goatherd, upon which Washington Irving founded his *Rip van Winkle*? Please, don't tell us that. We have it at our fingers' ends already."

"So I supposed," retorted Maximilian, "and therefore I meant to pass over Peter altogether. Still his story belongs to the same series as those which I am about to recount, all being connected with the popular belief that the great Emperor Frederick Barbarossa, who, according to history, perished in a crusade in Asia towards the end of the twelfth century, is still living in the Kiffhäuser with a number of knightly attendants."

"And I have heard," said Laurence, "that among his retinue is a certain Queen Holle, who acts as his housekeeper, though she played no part in his actual history. She was the daughter of a king, they say, and was cruelly murdered. Her spirit finding no rest in the grave, wandered about without fixed habitation, till at last she heard that the Emperor Frederick had secured for himself a snug retreat in the Kiffhäuser. Having learned that he was a just and kindly man, she proceeded to the mountain, and was only too glad to accept the office of waiting upon the emperor and his numerous retainers."

"I wonder where she heard of Frederick's kindness!" ejaculated Edgar. "The Emperor Barbarossa is a well-known historical character, and this singular Queen Holle, if she ever lived at all, must have died long before his time."

"Nay," observed Maximilian, "I strongly suspect that she is neither a princess nor a ghost, but that she is the Holle of Pagan Germany, who has crept into a Christian legend. However, to show how well her memory has been preserved, I will relate a legend that is not so old as the present century. During one of the campaigns of the Emperor Napoleon in Germany, it appears a French marshal coming to Nordhausen, cast his eyes upon the ruins of the ancient castle on the Kiffhäuser, and hearing that they were haunted, determined that they should afford him a night's lodging. All attempts to dissuade him from his purpose were futile; he slept in the ruined castle, and at midnight received a visit from Queen Holle, who had been sent by the Emperor Frederick for the purpose of bidding him warn Napoleon against the projected invasion of Russia. She added, that if Napoleon valued his own reputation, he would evacuate Germany without delay, since the Emperor Frederick did not like to see his German people subjected to Frenchmen. The marshal, it is said, truthfully conveyed the message to the French Emperor, and made such an impression upon all his generals, that with



one voice they implored him to desist from the Russian expedition."

"And, as we all know, they implored to little purpose," added Edgar. "It is a strange thing that the advice of a ghost is hardly ever followed. But surely I have heard somewhere that the long-lived emperor in the Kiffhäuser is not Frederick Barbarossa, but one of the Othos, whose spirit, in consequence of some difficulties with the church, was doomed to float about for some years after his death, like that of Queen Holle, till at last it found a refuge in the Kiffhäuser."

"Good," remarked Maximilian; "your story is just in accordance with some of the local traditions. And, strange to say, the two accounts of the imperial occupants of the Kiffhäuser are made to harmonise with each other. There is a legend to the effect, that after residing in the mountain for several centuries, the Emperor Otho quitted that abode, which was immediately afterwards occupied by Frederick Barbarossa, who lives there still. Some say that Otho, on leaving the Kiffhäuser, betook himself to his grave, and there rested in peace. Others assert that he merely shifted his quarters to the castle of Quedlinburg, and that he now resides in the cellars of that venerable edifice. His vitality seems to be of a very equivocal kind, for a maid-servant, who is reported to have seen him, represented that he was made of gold, and unable to stir. This notion of gold is expanded into a prophecy, according to which Quedlinburg Castle will one day be burned down, and be rebuilt with the gold into which the emperor's body has been transmuted."

"There is no doubt," said Edgar, "that these exceptional legends point to the first Otho, whose parents, Henry the Fowler and Matilda, were buried at Quedlinburg. The second and third of the name both perished in Italy."

"I perfectly agree with you," returned Maximilian. "The younger Othos were scarcely figures to be prominent in a whole cycle of German legends, and, if I remember right, Otho the Great had a reddish beard, like that from which Frederick derived his name Barbarossa."

"I presume you have more legends relating to the Kiffhäuser. Let us have one," said Laurence to Maximilian.

"Very good," said Maximilian to Laurence. "Once upon a time a poor man of Tilleda, a village at the foot of the mountain, entertained, according to custom, the sponsors for his eighth child. The wine, it may

be supposed, soon ran short, and the happy parent ordered his eldest daughter, a comely girl in her teens, to fetch some more from the cellar. Knowing the condition of the cellar, the damsel, somewhat embarrassed by the order, asked her father what particular cellar he had in view. 'The cellar of the old knights in the Kiffhäuser,' he replied, meaning nothing more than a joke. The innocent girl, however, thought that he was in earnest, and accordingly, with a small pail in her hand, she ascended the mountain till she reached a large cavern, which she had never seen before, and at the entrance of which she saw a comely-looking dame, with a bundle of keys at her side. Though somewhat startled, she stated the cause of her expedition, and the hospitable dame promised that, if she would follow her, she should receive, free of charge, a supply of far better wine than her father had ever tasted. As they proceeded together through a subterranean passage, the strange lady made anxious inquiries as to how things were going on at Tilleda. It appeared that she had once lived in the very house now tenanted by the girl's father, and had been carried off by the knights, who not long before had borne away from Kelbra, a small town in the neighbourhood, four beautiful maidens, who might still sometimes be seen riding about on magnificently accoutred horses. As her age advanced she had been appointed superintendent of the cellars."

"This little episode," observed Laurence, "I find extremely interesting. The superintendent of the cellars obviously corresponds to Queen Holle, so that we evidently have the same person represented with natural and supernatural attributes."

"After a while they reached a door, which, opened by the lady with the keys, disclosed a spacious cellar, on each side of which lay vast barrels. From one of these the girl's pail was filled, and she was told by her guide that, whenever any particular festival was held at her father's house, she might come for more. She was warned, however, not to inform any one besides her father whence the beverage was obtained, and more especially enjoined never to sell a drop of it. A free gift should be freely dispensed, and whoever slighted this sacred maxim would surely find cause for repentance. The wine was carried home, and proved excellent, and a few days afterwards another feast was given, at which another sample of the delicious liquor made its appearance. The poor man of Tilleda was for a time very popular, but soon his neighbours began to shake their heads and whisper."

"Ah," exclaimed Edgar, "when a man is equally famed for the emptiness of his pockets and the excellence of his wine, he can hardly hope to escape remark."

"Of all the inquisitive neighbours," continued Maximilian, "the most inquisitive was an innkeeper, who was in the habit of adulterating his liquors, and who had no sooner tasted the marvellous wine than he was convinced that it might be diluted to any extent, and still command a high price. He therefore took occasion to watch the girl during one of her ascents of the Kiffhäuser, and, having watched her proceedings, and ascertained the situation of the door, set out for the cellar one evening on his own account, trundling before him, on a wheelbarrow, the largest barrel he could find. When he approached the entrance he was overwhelmed by a sudden darkness, and a violent hurricane hurled him and his barrel from crag to crag, till at last he found himself in a vault. While thus uncomfortably lodged he saw passing before him a coffin, covered with a pall, which was followed by his wife and some of his neighbours. He swooned, and when he recovered he was still in the vault, where he heard the clock of the village church striking midnight directly over his head. He was evidently in the burial-place of Tilleda."

"A singular operation on the part of the hurricane," remarked Edgar.

"From his unpleasant predicament he was relieved by a monk," proceeded Maximilian, "who, leading him to a flight of steps, pressed some money into his hand without uttering a word, and, having conducted him through an open door, laid him at the foot of the mountain. Shivering with cold, he reached home by one o'clock, and immediately took to his bed, where, within three days, he died. The money given to him by the monk exactly covered the expenses of his funeral."

"Clearly another story of the Ali Baba kind," said Laurence, "turning on the notion of a good and a bad treasure seeker. The law, however, that supernatural gifts may not be sold is altogether new."

"And observe," said Maximilian, "that an infringement of this law leads to nothing less than the death of the criminal. All the legends of the Kiffhäuser bear some reference to a hidden treasure, though they differ from each other in detail. The story is told, for instance, of a shepherd, who, being too poor to marry his sweetheart, was strolling miserably on the mountain, till he found a flower of singular

beauty, which he stuck in his hat. He also entered a cavern, where he found lying about a number of small glittering stones, which he put into his pocket. Just as he was about to return into the open air, a human voice warned him not to leave the best behind, and immediately he ran outside the cavern, and the door was closed behind him. The flower, which he had stuck in his hat as a gift for his sweetheart, was gone, and what made the loss the more mortifying, a dwarf who suddenly stood before him told him that it was more valuable than all the treasures of the mountain. When he reached home, the stones with which he had filled his pockets proved to be ingots of gold, and he married in comfortable circumstances. But the 'Wunder-Blume' (wonderful flower), as they call it, was lost for ever, though the mountaineers search for it to this day."

"One might almost fancy that two stories are here combined into one," remarked Laurence, "and that the wondrous flower is altogether independent of the treasures of Frederick Barbarossa. It is found, indeed, only to be lost, and this answers no purpose whatever."

"I am not so sure of that," returned Edgar. "In my opinion, the temporary possession of the flower enabled the shepherd to find the golden ingots, and therefore he was, to a limited extent, benefited by its virtues."

"And your opinion is doubtless correct," observed Maximilian, "for according to another legend of the Kiffhäuser, a peasant accidentally trod so hard upon a flower of the kind, that it was broken off the stalk, and remained attached to his shoe-buckle. This endowed him with the power of seeing spirits, and soon the mountain opened, and the emperor and his retinue came out to play at skittles, the potentate in this case being not Frederick but Otho. It is recorded that they played the game in a singular style, not bowling straight at the pins, but flinging them up in the air, so that they hit the mark on their descent. At midnight they vanished, and the mountain closed behind them. A skittle, which the shepherd contrived to take home, proved to be of pure gold."

"This tale does not point to such a good moral as that about the girl and the wine," objected Edgar.

"Certainly not," said Maximilian. "Here is one of an entirely opposite tendency. A shepherd, while whistling a tune near the ruined castle, was asked by a dwarf if he

would like to see the Emperor Frederick. He readily answered in the affirmative, and was conducted into a grotto, the sides of which glistened with golden stars, while the emperor, magnificently attired, sat at a stone table in the centre, with a light burning before him. The shepherd made a low bow, constantly glancing at the treasures of the grotto, till, after a pause, the emperor asked him if ravens still flew about the mountain. On the man answering that they did, the emperor lifted up his hands and exclaimed, in a melancholy voice, 'Then I must sleep here for many years more!' Thereupon the shepherd retired with the dwarf, and to his annoyance did not receive so much as a keepsake."

"That I suppose was because he was the bringer of bad tidings," suggested Edgar.

"I cannot say," rejoined Maximilian. "Possibly the furtive glances at the treasures of the grotto had something to do with it; for, as we have seen, the greed of gain is not esteemed at the Kiffhäuser. So great, however, is the emperor's love of music, that on one occasion he was liberal to a band of itinerant musicians, who played at midnight on the mountain in the hope of being handsomely rewarded. While they were in the middle of the second tune the emperor's daughter came up to them trippingly, and by mute gestures requested them to follow her."

"The emperor's daughter!" cried Larence. "Queen Holle in another shape!"

"The mountain opened," continued Maximilian, "and they found themselves in a cavern, where a sumptuous banquet was spread before them. Of this they partook freely, and were somewhat disappointed that no one offered them any of the surrounding treasures. They cheered themselves, however, with the hope that they would receive something handsome on parting, and, indeed, when they took their leave at dawn, the emperor's daughter, in obedience to her father's wish, presented each of them with a small green bush. This they accepted with due reverence, but no sooner were they in the open air than they all laughed aloud at the stinginess of their imperial host, and, with the exception of one, flung away the seemingly worthless gifts. The one who had been less precipitate found, when he reached home, that every leaf of his bush had been changed into a broad piece of gold. He communicated his good fortune to his comrades, who immediately began to search for the slighted treasure; but their search was in vain."

"After all," inquired Edgar, "which emperor do you regard as the legitimate occupant of the Kiffhäuser—Frederick or Otho, or both?"

"Unquestionably neither," responded Maximilian. "Though historical names occur in the legends, these have no reference to anything that occurred during the eventful lives of the two emperors who bore them. There is no reason that either Otho or Frederick should be the owner of a hidden treasure. The original occupant of the mansion was no doubt some sort of gnome belonging to pre-historical tradition. The earlier Saxon emperors, of whom Otho is the greatest, was associated with Quedlinburg, and the famous Diet of 1181, at which Henry the Lion was pardoned by his forgiving lord, connected the name of Frederick with Erfurt. These two emperors became especially marked men in the immediate vicinity of the Kiffhäuser, and the anonymous gnome in course of time received two baptismal appellations to which he was in nowise entitled."

#### THE TWO THREADS.

A babe, who crept from the downy nest  
Fond hands had loved to deck,  
Glowing and sweet from its rosy rest,  
To cling, caressing and caressed,  
To its gentle mother's neck;  
Another, who shrank in its squalid lair,  
In the noisy crowded court,  
Dreading to waken to curse and blow,  
The woman, whose life of sin and woe,  
Won from sleep a respite short.  
From the darkness and the light,  
Weave the black thread, weave the white.

A girl, in her graceful guarded home,  
Mid sunshine, and birds, and flowers,  
Whose fair face brightened as she heard  
Her gallant lover's wooing word,  
In the fragrant gloaming hours.  
Another, tossed out, a nameless wail,  
On the awful sea of life,  
Mid poverty, ignorance, and wrong;  
Young pulses beating full and strong  
For the fierce unaided strife.  
From the darkness and the light,  
Weave the black thread, weave the white.

A wife, beside her household hearth,  
In her happy matron pride,  
Raising her infant in her arms,  
Showing its thousand baby charms  
To the father at her side.  
Another, who stood on the river's banks,  
Hearing her weakling's cries:  
Thinking, "a plunge would end for both;  
Cruelty, hunger, and broken troth,  
Harsh earth, and iron skies."  
From the darkness and the light,  
Weave the black thread, weave the white.  
Her children's children at her knee,  
With friends and kindred round,  
An aged woman with silver hair,  
Passing from life, mid the love and prayer,  
That her gracious evening crowned.  
Another, crouched by the stunted warmth

Of the workhouse homeless hearth;  
Her bitter fare unkindly given;  
Knowing as little of joys in Heaven  
As of gladness on the earth.  
From the darkness and the light,  
Weave the black thread, weave the white.

A soul that sprang from the rose-strewn turf,  
With its carven cross adorned.  
Another, that left its pauper's grave,  
Where rank and coarse the grasses wave,  
O'er rest, unnamed, unmourned.  
And two, who sought their Redeemer's feet,  
By His saving blood to plead,  
May He in His mercy guide us all,  
For sunbeams and shadows strangely fall;  
The riddle is hard to read.  
From the darkness and the light,  
Weave the black thread, weave the white.

### THE BLUEBOTTLE FLY.

#### A FRENCH ART-STUDENT'S STORY.

##### IN FOUR CHAPTERS. CHAPTER III.

FOR the first few minutes I ran swiftly down the hollow, anxious to escape as quickly as possible from the baleful influence of the occupants of the coucou, amongst whom the bluebottle fly had assumed the greatest importance to my fancy. The descent was rapid, and the sound of the grating wheels was soon lost in the distance. I knew this part of the wood well enough. The narrow gorge, dividing the plateau on which stood the Three Acacias from that occupied by that of the White Thorn, was steep and difficult to pass, and visitors in general preferred the broad green alley to this rugged path. But I was too much delighted at finding myself once more at liberty to heed the danger presented either by the loose stones or the slippery moss, and laughed in mockery at my own awkwardness as I alternately stumbled and slid to the bottom. Here I trod the green sward merrily enough, rejoicing in the silence, and looking down each opening between the trees for new effects of light and sunshine. But what was my dismay on perceiving that my nerves had become so completely shattered by the emotions I had undergone, and my head so completely bewildered — perhaps still rather disturbed by the *petit bleu* — that I felt no longer the same eager interest in the beauties of nature that I had done on first starting in the morning. I began to find myself burdened, moreover, with my tools, and much worn by my previous walk, and once or twice wished myself quietly seated in my usual place at the studio.

The hill gained, however, and the White Thorn reached, I felt a momentary return of the hope and faith which had led me

thus far to seek their fulfilment, and began the self-discipline necessary to insure forgetfulness by compelling myself to give undivided attention to the beautiful study spread out by nature's hand before me. The breeze from the opposite hill brought freedom and freshness on its wings; and as I fixed my position and spread my tools all around me on the grass, inhaling the while the intoxication of the scene, I fondly hoped that all memory of the excitement I had undergone would soon be obliterated. I can safely declare that I tried to dissipate my thoughts by every means in my power. I whistled aloud; I sang the tunes most in vogue amongst us; I pulled up the long grass and nibbled it between my teeth, and then set to work at arranging my colours and crayons with that feverish and noisy ardour which never bodes good to the projects of the artist. The White Thorn had long ceased to blossom, but the dead flowers lay in thick masses on the turf beneath, and every time I stamped my foot impatiently a faint perfume arose like a souvenir of the past spring, balmy and aromatic as incense. It would have soothed me at any other time, but just now it served but to add to my irritation. Everything, in short, was at first inclined to assume a green and yellow tinge and flavour, and I was fain to make a desperate effort to clear my brain, and concentrate my attention on my labour. So great is the power of will, especially when aided by outward circumstances, that at last I could view, without any great disturbance of mind, the myriads of flies disporting themselves in their mazy dance over the pool beneath, and could even listen to the buzz of the humble-bee as he flew past, without that twitching of the mouth and quivering of the eyelids which the remembrance of the carrion fly in the coucou had at first occasioned. By degrees I grew more calm, and began at last to recover from the disagreeable impression I had experienced.

I sketched out the valley and the hills of Sèvres which lay beyond. There were certain fleecy clouds gathered in strange groups upon the summit of those hills, and as I gazed intently on their airy and fantastic shapes, all my enthusiastic love of art returned. Nature was victorious. The enemy was conquered, and as I rubbed the clouds in on the coarse grey tinted paper, softening down the hard black chalk into the transparent tint which represented the forms so well, I felt that faith and hope were reviving fast within me, and that I



was myself again. I had just terminated my rough sketch of the view from the White Thorn, to which the clouds I had been rubbing in were destined to serve as horizon—a little too hard perhaps, for my hand had scarcely recovered its wonted lightness and elasticity. But I left the softening to some future time, for I was eager to accomplish many other sketches before the strong glare of noon should drive me to seek shelter in the deep shade of the wood. Alas! the drawing of the White Thorn was *never* softened down, and a long and dreary time elapsed before I completed another. My mother had it framed, however, rough and unfinished as it was, and it hangs over the little font of holy water by her bedside. Poor soul! for many months she thought it would be the last I should ever execute, and prized and treasured it accordingly.

The sketch was concluded. The effect was satisfactory even to myself, and I stepped back with true artistic complacency to view the drawing from a distance, and compare it with the original clouds, now fast sailing away behind the hills, and growing tinged with the reflection of the foliage, while the line of wood was lighted in its turn by the strange blending of both objects into one undefined outline, leaving the gazer in doubt as to where the earth ended, and the sky began.

I had just determined on seizing this effect, said to be the most difficult to produce in the whole range of the landscape painter's art. I was in a rapture of delight. A sudden enlightenment had broken in upon me. I knew I should succeed; I felt that the hour had arrived. Nature herself was whispering in my ear the secret of which I had been so long in search, and in a kind of artistic frenzy I flung myself upon the ground, burying my face amid the grass to listen to her holy teaching.

Just then, when my whole soul was detached from earth in communion with itself, and my very life had entered, as it were, into the new world thus suddenly opened to my sight, I was startled by a cry of anguish—a human cry, so full of pain and agony that, as it broke upon the stillness of the air, every fibre in my frame became convulsed. Strange to say, it seemed so close to my ear that I could hardly believe that it had not proceeded from some one standing by my side, and it was only on reflection I remembered that it must have been brought by the wind across the hollow. The sort of crag on which stands the White Thorn juts out

on one side over the ravine beneath, which is so completely choked up in that direction with brushwood and briars that the view over the wood is completely hidden. Down this very side had been worn a rough uneven path through the covert which lies below; and the joyous laugh of the young artist in search of the picturesque even there is often heard issuing from amongst the seemingly impenetrable wood, startling almost into fits the good bourgeois who has been toiling up the hill on the other side, to enjoy the view from the White Thorn. But no joyous laughter greeted my ear at this moment. The deadly shriek which had caused me suddenly to abandon my work just when I was at the highest point of interest had been followed by a pause, during which the stillness seemed dread and awful as that of the grave. And terrible as the shock had been, the silence which ensued appeared more frightful still.

While I stood pale and trembling, listening with intense eagerness to catch the slightest sound, the boughs of the ravine began to rustle furiously, and I became aware of the gasping effort and the panting breath of some individual striving with might and main to attain the height at which I stood. Presently a hoarse voice called aloud from half-way up the path. The accents were rude and rough:

"Hallo there, you painter; just make haste here, will you, and lend us a hand. Curse the prickly brambles; they are tearing me to pieces! Here, come along quick, for God's sake! The devil seize me if I can get a step higher! We are in the greatest trouble down below, and want your help."

The speaker had opened the branches wide. I looked down to where he was standing with extended arms and head thrown back. In a moment I recognised the military man who had sat on the swing-board of Tony Lanternean's concou.

"Come quick!" exclaimed he, in a breathless tone. "You must lose no time." And as he let go the boughs on one side, and swung round to stretch his hand towards me, the action was so helpless, so like that of a drowning mariner endeavouring to seize the rope thrown to him amid the boiling surge, that I obeyed the summons almost mechanically, and scrambled down to where he was standing, in actual danger, upon a loose stone which threatened each moment to give way beneath his feet.

"Come quick—come quick!" again exclaimed he in a hoarse whisper, at the same time seizing me by the arm with such

strong grip that he almost threw me off my balance, and for a moment we both tottered, in doubt whether we should not roll together to the bottom of the hollow. But my youth and elastic step soon cleared the difficulties of the passage, and I followed the stranger in bewilderment, the only impression on my brain being that my evil destiny was about to begin once more, and that the hot burning pain on the top of my head, which had begun to subside during that momentary repose I had enjoyed up by the White Thorn, was returning with redoubled violence.

The sudden glare of the strong sunlight as I emerged from the dark shade of the thicket almost blinded me. I felt the rush of blood to my head, and every object seemed to dance before my eyes, so that I could scarcely steady my pace sufficiently to draw near to the group towards which my companion was hurrying. At the bottom of the hollow runs a long narrow gorge—always moist and damp, always soft and green. In this space was gathered a knot of gentlemen busily engaged in some hot dispute, as I inferred from the murmur of their voices, which seemed sharp and angry, and from the exuberance of gesture with which the conversation was being carried on. No sooner had my conductor joined them than they all simultaneously turned to me, and as the group opened I beheld, with horror and amazement, a human form stretched out upon the grass, the head supported by a stone, and the blood pouring from a wound in the throat, so rapidly that its crimson stream had dyed the grass and flowers all around. As I approached I recognised at once in the young man who lay before me, and whose life-blood was ebbing away with such fearful speed, the youth who had been my companion on my ill-starred journey from Charnat. Not one of the individuals present appeared to remember for a moment the awful presence of the dead. All seemed under the influence of some personal fear; two of the party appeared to be engaged in discussion, pointing in various directions, as if in difference of opinion concerning the route they were to follow. One of the gentlemen, in his shirt-sleeves, was bending low to wash his hands in the little spring. I alone knelt down by the corpse, and laid my hand upon the heart to see if it were beating still; but no pulsation was perceptible. The youth lay there with his face turned upwards to the sky, his eyeballs glistening through the half-closed lids, his lips wide apart, just as he had appeared before me reclining in the coucou

scarcely more than an hour ago. I felt as if in a hideous dream, from which the questioning and peremptory suggestions of the party, all uttered at once, and all demanding a reply, had scarcely power to arouse me. The man in his shirt-sleeves, having finished his ablutions, turned towards me his pale, guilty countenance, and, perhaps in answer to my inquiring gaze, began to exculpate himself before he was accused. He said that he had intended to give his adversary but a slight wound, in order to teach him to be more guarded in his language for the future, and not to call a man "a cheat and sharper" because the run of luck happened to be in his favour; but the turf was slippery, and before he could recover himself, he had slipped forward, and the point of his sword being raised at that moment, it had entered his adversary's neck, and the blood had gushed out with such sudden violence that the youth, uttering but one shriek, had fallen lifeless on the grass.

"Ay, but all that will never be listened to by the Procureur Imperial," said one of his companions, hurriedly. "Lose no time, I advise you, in talking, but get away at once." Then turning to me he added: "This duel, lawful and loyal as it in reality is, wears an ugly aspect, monsieur. By an unfortunate accident, the doctor who was to have accompanied the party was left behind, when the coach which bore the unfortunate victim in this affair broke down in the wood; then, the only second on his side happens to be Bras-de-Fer, the fencing-master, with whom he has been in training, and who must have been aware how little he was fitted to cope with Monsieur de Marsiac, the most skilful swordsman in all Paris. Then again the quarrel took place at the gaming-table, where the victor in this combat was the winner of a tremendous sum from the young man he has killed—as he declares—by accident. In short, we must be off at once, ere people are abroad, or we shall have the gendarmes about our ears, and we shall none of us escape easily under such circumstances."

"Come along, De Ferville," exclaimed the individual in his shirt-sleeves, who had been the murderer, for as such I looked upon him, of the poor youth who lay dead at my feet. "We have scarcely time to catch the train, and we have then to get to the Gare du Nord for the Brussels railway. This young gentleman will best know what to do. He will only have to go at once to the commissaire and declare to the loyalty of the fight in which our adversary has fallen. The body must not

be left alone, or it would look like——" He hesitated for a word, but finding none but the right one, spoke it out boldly—"murder!" He had been hurrying on his paletôt the while, and tying on his cravat, and when this was completed he walked with a quick pace down the gorge, and his form was lost amid the hanging wood of the opposite bank. His two companions followed quickly, and soon the fencing-master and myself were left standing alone beside the corpse.

"I, too, must go and hide," murmured Bras-de-Fer; "but whither? I have no means to fly to Brussels like these young sparks. Ah, that De Marsiac! who shall ever tell whether it was luck or intention which made his sword fly upwards at the first lunge? Had the boy but had time to give that thrust which I had been at so much pains to teach him, it would have been, not himself, but De Marsiac who would be lying here!"

All the while he had been speaking he had been gathering up the two long weapons which lay half-buried amongst the grass. And, after wiping them carefully upon the silk handkerchief in which they had been enveloped, and looking down the blades with a scrutiny that made me shudder, he replaced them in the green-baize bag, which all this while hung suspended on his arm. Then, as if suddenly remembering my presence, he said, looking over his shoulder as he departed:

"You cannot bear witness to much, my friend; but you can say with truth that I had chosen the open space beneath the Three Acacias for this encounter, but De Marsiac declared that the sun was already too powerful up there, and so we drew lots for the choice of this spot or the other. Of course, De Marsiac had the luck—he always has. He knew well enough he could not have 'slipped' so as to have thrust the point of his sword through his adversary's throat up at the Three Acacias: the ground is dry and gravelly there, not soft and slippery as it is in the gorge."

With this dark and terrible hint, he too disappeared, leaving me face to face with the dead. I could not turn away without giving one last look upon those poor, pale features and that stiffening form; and then I thought it would be cruel and unmanly to leave him thus exposed to the chance of injury from sun, from air—from insects—and summoning all my courage, I approached, and seizing the long silk neckerchief the youth had taken off before the combat, and which was hanging on a branch just above

his head, I stooped down to cover his face from the glare of day. As I did so, a faint buzzing noise smote my ear with as great a shock as though a cannon-ball had been fired close beside me, and the next moment the sensation of some crawling object beneath my fingers renewed the terror and loathing I had felt before! The accursed blue-bottle fly was still hovering there, and, coward that I was, I durst not raise the kerchief to drive it away, but fled without turning to look again, and rushed with desperate haste towards Meudon.

It was well for me that the hour was still so early, or I should have had the whole of Meudon at my heels, as I tore like a madman down the narrow, ill-paved street to the residence of the commissaire. I had anticipated some difficulty in obtaining an audience at that unusual time; but the clerk in waiting received me readily. He scented a crime, and hurried me into the commissaire's private room to await his honour's pleasure. The commissaire, in dressing-gown and slippers, listened to my explanation of the business which had brought me there with evident impatience, for my manner was so wild and incoherent that he could scarcely be expected to place confidence in my statement, and when the *procès verbal* had been made out according to my deposition, he merely nodded his head and said, "We shall see, *mon garçon*," and disappeared to his *café au lait*, the aromatic steam of which pervaded the whole place; but, as he retired, I saw him make a sign to the *gendarme*, and point to my shoulder. And the latter, with the instinct of his calling, must have understood, for, as he followed the commissaire out, I heard him turn the key in the lock in order to secure me safely. The tumult of my soul can hardly be conceived, as I was left alone in that large, dreary room. I paced to and fro in the restlessness of despair, and as I passed by the looking-glass which hung in front of his honour's bureau, I could scarcely believe that the wild and haggard countenance I beheld reflected there was the same as that which had greeted my sight in the little mirror opposite the window of my *mansarde* at early dawn on that very same morning. My hair was all on end, my cheeks of ashy paleness, and my lips parched and cracked. My blouse, all torn and ragged with my forced passage through the brambles, seemed to hang loosely, all out of shape, upon my sunken figure, and—great God! what was that stain upon my sleeve? Ah, yes, I remembered that Bras-de-Fer had clutched

my arm as we slid together down the steep bank into the hollow. This was the precise spot where the fly had alighted, when I had sought to seize him in the coucou; the superstition had found its ample fulfilment there, and this was evidently the testimony which had risen against me to make the gendarme lock me in on a sign from the commissaire.

The minutes seemed hours as I paced the floor. I tried to divert my thoughts by gazing through the iron grating of the window looking into the garden; but close beneath lay a bed of scarlet verbena, and my eyes blinked and my soul sickened at the colour; and over it the bees were hovering with unceasing hum, and my ears could not bear the sound. It made me shudder as if with cold, while my brain seemed on fire.

At length the sound of footsteps slowly approaching gave a turn to my thoughts; the peculiar tread which denotes the bearing of a heavy load, the low murmur of the crowd, and the scuffling of many feet, announced that the errand of death was completed, and the corpse brought into the office yard.

I need not trouble you with the tale of the tedious process of the law, the endless questioning and examination. The legal persecution ended in my entire acquittal of all participation in the death of the young Count de Sorgerac, for such the letters and papers found on the deceased proved him to be, and as his watch and chain, and the rings upon his fingers, remained untouched, I was allowed to go free, with the sole obligation of appearing as witness against the criminals, for whose arrest a warrant was immediately made out. My portfolio and drawings, my colour-box and tin case, were all deposited at the greffe, so that I went forth from the office lightened of the burden which I had began to feel wearisome, but borne down by a strange and ponderous weight ten times more painful to bear, a load which seemed to be crushing me to the very earth. As I passed out from the commissaire's bureau I turned my anxious gaze towards the out-house where I knew that the dead body had been laid. A heavy padlock was on the door, and a gendarme was standing by to prevent the approach of idlers seeking to peep through the cranies of the ill-joined planks; but I knew well enough that neither bolt nor bar could exclude the deadly foe, now endowed by my diseased imagination with a superstitious terror, and I was weak and foolish enough to close my eyes and stop

my ears as I hurried by, lest I should obtain physical evidence of the presence of what I dreaded more than any other living thing upon this earth—the bluebottle fly!

### AN HOUR OF AGONY.

HAS the reader ever had a tussle with a Bengal tiger in full vigour and appetite? Has it chanced him to be in a balloon when perforated by Prussian bullets? Has it occurred to him to have been indulging a commendable curiosity in the remoter recesses of a coal-mine, when an explosion suddenly severed the connexion between himself and the world without? These are forms of uneasiness not to be lightly treated of. They shrink into nothing beside that supreme commingling of grief, astonishment, and horror it was my lot to experience on a certain never-to-be-forgotten evening of January, 'forty-nine.

Time's soothing influence has wrought its accustomed effect. All bitterness, all self-reproach, have died gradually away. In place of that mental tumult which, for a long period, attended the remembrance of the incident in question, I now find myself able to narrate with indifference, nay, even with a smile, the circumstance to which, but recently, my most intimate friends durst hardly hazard an allusion.

The Guild of Lumpeters represents one of the most ancient and honoured of London's civic institutions. What they are, *why* they are, I have not the remotest idea. Enough that, on a certain day in November, they are seen in their glory, their banners brighter, their bands brassier, their knights more corpulent, themselves sleeker and more redolent of wealth than any of their prosperous rivals. They have a hall solely, it would seem, for purposes of hospitality. They give dinners of inconceivable succulency and toothsome-ness. They invite mayors, nay, kings, who don't always come, and princes, who generally do, and they also invite me. I go, for I like them. All the Lumpeters of my acquaintance are noble, large-hearted men, citizen gentlemen, on whom London, in need of arm or purse, might confidently rely. I think if I were other than what I am, I would be a Lumpeter.

Pretexts were never wanting for a Lumpeter feed. The recovery of the chief city magistrate from a bilious attack, the breaking up of the frost, the birth of a son and heir to the Ban of Croatia, the arrival of a piebald elephant at the gardens of the



Zoological Society, such were among the events I could recal as having suggested feastful rejoicings. But that to which I have now to refer was to be regarded as a private and peculiar gathering, almost, in point of fact, a corporate family-feed, comprising no more than ninety-five guests, selected with discrimination, for the purpose of testing the merits of a new head-cook. Thus it had rather the nature of a grave and dispassionate deliberation than of a dinner, a certain sense of responsibility toning down the exuberant mirth that usually waited on these pleasant assemblies.

There were to be no speeches, no music. The usual loyal toasts, no more. Above all, no ladies. The presence of beauty, chatting in the gallery, might haply distract the attention of the weaker brethren from the great object of the meeting.

The Lumpeters were particular—and a thought conservative—in matters of attire. They themselves, to a man, adhered to the fashion, moribund, but not defunct, of ankle-buttoned pantaloons, figured-silk stockings, buckled shoes, expansive white waistcoats, and the mighty cravat patronised by his late majesty, the fourth George. It was well understood that the adoption of a similar costume on the part of their guests would be interpreted by Lumpeters as the most delicate return that could be offered for their hospitality. I, myself, invariably sported the fancy dress in question.

On the eventful day I have mentioned, it happened that I had been detained at chambers later than usual, and on reaching home had barely time to dress. While doing so, I received an anxious message from a friend who was to have accompanied me to the banquet, but who, being late, and himself a stranger to the guild, begged me to secure for him a seat next my own.

With increased expedition I finished my toilet, and the dining-hall being but five minutes' walk from my residence, I quickly buttoned on a pair of rough overalls, threw on my cloak, and hurried to the spot.

To my astonishment, a crowd, dense and still augmenting, was gathered about the door. It was only through the aid of a friendly policeman that I was enabled to make my way. "What was the matter?" I inquired of Number Nineteen B. The answer, half drowned in the clatter of arriving carriages, sounded something like "furrin swell." "Who?" Number Nineteen forbore to trust his lips with the name; but it were him as kills the wild beastesses out in Afrikey. It was a more intelligent porter who presently announced to me that the

renowned French lion-slayer, the Baron Bobadil de Bête-Fauve, had, at the last moment, accepted an invitation to dine at Lumpeters' Hall.

The character of the assembly had undergone a change. Not only had a little reinforcement of a hundred and twenty guests been hastily invited, but a dense mass of spectators lined the hall, the passages, and the ante-chamber, and even frothed over into the banqueting-room itself, the spacious gallery of which was already filled with ladies, whom the chivalrous guild had found it impossible to dream of excluding.

I was late; but dinner had been deferred half an hour. There would be just time to rush into the room, secure my friend's seat, and then deposit my cloak and overalls in the room devoted to such purposes.

The former matter was quickly arranged, and I was darting back, when I was met by a rush and pressure that almost forced me behind an adjacent screen. The Baron de Bête-Fauve had arrived, and was being triumphantly marched into the hall.

The Baron Bobadil de Bête-Fauve, when visible, proved to be a remarkably small gentleman, with intensely black eyes and moustaches, the latter curling fiercely up almost into the former; but my own situation demanded all my attention. Withdraw I could not. To sit down in that highly-attired society in light brown overalls, such as might be worn by a stableman, was not to be thought of. Ah! an idea. Just within the door, near the wall, but with space to get behind it, stood the large screen against which I had been pressed. Capturing a waiter, I drew him with me into that friendly shelter.

"Here, help, my man. Can't get back. Just let me slip off these confounded—hurry, now—" I gasped, and tore the buttons loose with lightning speed.

"All right, sir."

The waiter was as quick as I, and scarcely gave me time to disengage the last button, before he caught away the garment, and bundling it up, vanished in the crowd.

"Eh! hillo! stop, you! Good Hea—no—it's impossible! And yet—mercy on us—what shall I do?"

A horrible fact had revealed itself. In making my hurried toilet, I had actually buttoned on my overalls—omitting my black dress-pantaloons!

What was to become of me? Garments, indeed, were there—garments even too ample and obtrusive. I had worn while dressing a pair of wide but shortish trousers once used in a Chinese burlesque, written

by my friend Skelton for the delectation of a private circle, and which, being intended for that occasion only, were adorned with devices grotesque and terror-striking, represented in colours crimson, green, and blue. And these abominable trousers I had brought with me to Lumpeter's Hall!

A chill shot through me as I realised the full extent of the misadventure. I staggered back faintly against the wall, and endeavoured to collect myself. Glancing round the corner of the screen, I observed, with a shudder, that the company were taking their places, while the ladies in the gallery had risen, en masse, and were directing so concentrated a fire of eyes upon the entrance, where the valiant lion-queller had paused to return the salute that greeted him, that to escape had become impossible. I must remain where I was, till able to concert with some compassionate attendant a plan of escape.

There was the settling murmur and buzz, the "Gentlemen, pray silence. For grace!" and the "Stand still, waiters!" in a voice of authority. Grace followed, and the noise of feasting; but the next intelligible words froze my very soul.

"Remove that screen!"

Instinctively I clutched and held it back. There came a violent tug; but there was too much at stake for a feeble defence, and I held on with desperate tenacity.

"Quick, now, with that screen!" said the voice of authority. "What's the matter?"

"There's a gent, be'ind, a'-olding of it back," said some officious booby.

"Here—yon!" I gasped. "Five shillings! Ten! Twenty! Five pounds! Fetch—brown overalls! Forgot trou—Let the screen alone, can't ye?"

"Bless my 'cart, sir! 'Ere is a go!" said a waiter, grinning, but compassionate, for he had recognised me, even thus.

"Take that thing out of the way!" roared the voice of authority.

"Must do it, sir," explained the waiter. "The heatables can't come by. Stop! There's a vacant seat. 'Taint three steps off."

"That's mine," I groaned.

"Ow lucky! Now just you slip into it as I shifts the screen, so's to purtect you. Tuck the table-kiver well into your weskit, and nobody'll be the wiser. One, two, three. Hoff you go!"

Off it was necessary to go, for he caught away my defences, but extended the folding arms of the screen, so as nearly to touch the vacant seat. In that instant, how I hardly knew, I found myself fairly

seated at the board, the friend who should have accompanied me at my side.

"You take it coolly, old fellow," remarked the latter. "I fancied that at these dinners punctuality——"

"I take it coolly, *very* coolly," I replied. "And it is for your sake I am doing so. May I ask you to spare me as much adjacent table-cloth as is compatible with your personal convenience?"

"Table-cloth! Assuredly. But why?"

"There are reasons, hidden reasons. But of that hereafter. A glass of wine?"

"My friend is agitated. His manly fingers quiver. Something is amiss with Charteris," remarked my companion, in the sepulchral tone he is given to use when chaffing those he loves.

Dicky Skelton, who never, so far as it is ascertained, had a relative in the world, dresses always in the deepest mourning. He never laughs, outwardly. He is mirth itself, within. He has written burlesques by the score. To Skelton is due the evisceration of words that have baffled the skill of the most accomplished tormentors of the English language.

"My friend, confide in me," continued Dick, smacking his lips, for the Lumpeter Burgundy is not to be tasted every day. "You are ill at ease."

"At the knees. A trifle."

"To remember one's troubles in such a scene is weak."

"To forget one's trousers is madness," I whispered, with clenched teeth, in his ear.

"One's——!" ejaculated Skelton, faintly, as he turned upon me a countenance naturally wan and lengthy, but now whitened and elongated with real alarm. "Yon—don't mean—— Do I distinctly understand——?"

"You understand my reason for requiring as large a portion of the table-cloth as you can conveniently spare."

"Now this is very noteworthy, yes, it is really curious," remarked Mr. Skelton, with more interest than sympathy. "I do not remember having ever met with a precisely similar situation. A man may, indeed, forget an essential garment. The mind cannot always be dwelling on these outward things. But has he no friend? Wife, servant, grandmother? Is there no hand to bar his exit, no tongue to say, 'My dear, my very dear sir, return, reflect. Consult, if not prevailing fashions, at least that warmth and comfort as needful to man as his daily food?' Did none do this?"

I shook my head, and briefly recounted the cause and manner of my misfortune.

My friend gazed at me sorrowfully:

"So fair above!" he murmured. "So—well, so singular below! Who now, in this brilliant assembly—graced, as I perceive, with the presence of many beautiful (and giggling) women—would imagine that you, sitting here so well got up, radiant with artificial mirth, are a type of Milton's Sin?"

I replied, curtly, that I accepted the situation, as he was pleased to term it, with the calmness that seemed expedient, and that having done all that man could do, I awaited the decrees of fate, and the arrival of the waiter, to whom I had offered a sovereign to smuggle in my overalls, at the first opportune moment.

"Awfully lucky for you, my boy, there's to be no speech-making!" continued Skelton. "We would have had you on your defenceless legs in no time."

"Have you seen the toast-list, gentlemen?" asked a portly member of the guild, on my left, as he politely offered a card.

There was a catalogue of at least twenty toasts, with names appended as proposers; and, as proposing that of the guest of the evening, the Baron de Bête-Fauve, "Mr. Reginald Charteris!"

At the same moment a note was placed in my hand. It was from the chairman.

"Oblige us. We know your ready eloquence. Baron struck with your face and manner. Wishes to hear you speak. Touch up the lions."

Snatching out my pencil-case I wrote: "Throat impracticable. Uvula cut off this morning. Should create more astonishment than interest if forced upon my legs."

I breathed. That peril was averted. My spirits rose as the merry feast proceeded, and I began to see more distinctly the humorous side of my little misadventure. The atmosphere was warm and pleasant. Why, I had been present at many a dinner in the north where men dined, from preference, without their—that is, in kilts. True, I had not exactly a kilt; but, even were I compelled to stand forth from my present retirement, the exhibition of knee, the publication of calf, would be no greater than is legally sanctioned within five hundred miles of this spot.

Ha! a sensation. "Pray silence," &c. Grace. "Non nobis." Then the usual loyal toasts, and we drank prosperity to several collateral branches of the reigning house (the Lumpeters were nothing if not loyal), before we arrived at the great toast of the evening—the Baron de Bête-Fauve. This was given by the chairman himself; and,

with the baron's reply (in French), and counter-proposition of the health of the ladies, was received with the greatest enthusiasm.

The excitement was just settling down, when—

"Hallo!" exclaimed Skelton, "what's up, now? Is any one expected, I wonder? They are putting a big velvet chair next to Bête-Fauve. It must be a swell. Can the Prince of—"

"So long as it is not intended for my humble person," I replied, with an easy smile, "I am perfectly——"

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Charteris," said the voice of the head-steward, who, followed by two attendant waiters, had approached us unobserved. "The chair, sir, presents his compliments, and begs you will do him and the Baron de Bête-Fauve the favour to occupy the seat that has been placed for you between them."

My heart stood still. My hair rose. A chill of horror shot through me.

"The baron, sir, speaks no English, and though him and the chair has been hard at it all dinner, neither of 'em has understood a word," said the steward, confidentially. "The chair, sir, and the company generally," added Mr. Feastful, with poetic exaggeration, "would 'ail with pleasure the spectacle of your introduction to the baron."

"The baron be——" I know not what I was about to say. My voice faltered. I had caught a glimpse of the fair occupants of the gallery, leaning over the balustrade in their eagerness to examine the favoured individual for whom the chair of state had been so ostentatiously prepared, and a vision of myself marching up the hall, clad in my abominable burlesque Chinese trousers, the mark of every eye, almost made me reel in my chair.

I shuddered, strove to speak, conceived a wild thought of diving under the table, when, whish! with a lurid, fitful swirl, out went the enormous lustre, with all the minor lights following suit. We were in total darkness.

I will not describe the confusion that succeeded, the screams of laughter from the gallery, the scramble and the crash below. Torches gleamed in the doorways almost before we knew what had happened, and the accident that had occasioned the sudden extinction of our light was remedied within a few minutes.

But, when order was restored, one chair stood vacant at that hospitable board! Whether its occupant had been trampled

under foot in the disorder, or had vanished with the light, was never known. My private opinion is that, while anxious inquiries were being made in the Lumpeters' Hall, the missing gentleman was warming his legs at his domestic hearth, sipping his grog, and smiling at the peril he had so narrowly escaped.

## CASTAWAY.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "BLACK SHEEP," "WRECKED IN PORT," &c. &c.

### BOOK III.

#### CHAPTER V. THE NEXT DAY.

MR. DRAGE, smoking a sedative pipe in the rectory garden after breakfast the next morning, pondering over his strange interview with Philip Vane, and wondering when and how he should hear of its result, was startled from his reverie by the clanging of the bell, and looking up saw Mrs. Pickering at the gate. This visit was not unexpected, nor, truth to tell, had it been contemplated without alarm. The rector felt tolerably certain that Mrs. Pickering would come to tell him how matters had progressed at Wheatercroft, during the stay of the strangers from London; but it was by no means certain that he himself might not have been seen in colloquy with Vane by some of the servants on the premises, or even by the housekeeper herself, and that the reason for and the result of that colloquy might be demanded of him. To be sure, he argued with himself, he had informed Mrs. Pickering of his determination of some time or other seeking an interview with her husband on her behalf, and had obtained her consent, however unwilling it was given; but he confessed to himself that Mrs. Pickering had looked upon his declared intention of seeking that interview as vague and remote, and would probably resent his having availed himself of the first opportunity which presented itself without further communication with her on the subject.

There, however, she was at the garden gate, and, whatever happened, she must not be kept waiting. So Mr. Drage hurried down the path and gave her admittance, bidding her good morning, with that strange mixture of earnestness and nervousness which always characterised his communications with Mrs. Pickering.

"Well, now tell me about your guests," said he, after the ordinary salutation. "They arrived according to promise. They stayed with you, and——"

"And are gone," said Madge. They went off by the express this morning, to my intense relief; for I felt bound, fettered, and as though I could scarcely breathe, while they were in the house."

"You carried out your intention of asking Sir Geoffry to allow you to keep your room?"

"Yes; he accorded it at once, and nothing could have worked better. Mr. Vane and his friend were in the house nearly four-and-twenty hours, and during the whole of that time they neither of them caught sight of me."

"The other man might have seen you without any danger to yourself, I suppose?"

"I am not so sure of that. This Mr. Delabole is a man who followed us one day from the theatre at Wexeter, and seemed to take particular notice of us. By the way, what could have brought him to Wexeter at that time, I wonder? It was certainly the same man; I recognised his figure."

"Indeed! Then, though unseen yourself, you managed to see them?"

"Scarcely to see them. Some time after dinner, when it was quite dusk, they went into the garden to smoke, and strolled up and down the little side path leading to the stables, which is immediately under my window. My attention was attracted to them by hearing Philip's well-remembered short sarcastic laugh. Then I peered out cautiously once or twice, and perceived them moving about in the gloom. There was not light enough for me to see their features, but I recognised the other man's square, thick-set figure, and Philip's swinging walk."

"You heard Mr. Vane laugh?" asked the rector, somewhat anxiously. "He must have been amused; I conclude things must have been going well."

"It was by no means that kind of laugh," replied Madge, "but one which I have heard too often not to recognise its meaning—short, hard, and sarcastic. Besides, though I could not distinguish the words they uttered, I could hear the tone in which they spoke, and my impression was that they were using anything but pleasant language to each other."

"That looks as though they had not been able to carry through the business which brought them down here," said the rector.

"I do not fancy matters went quite as smoothly as they anticipated," said Madge. "I spoke to Sir Geoffry just before coming out. He told me he had informed those gentlemen that he was not prepared to give



them a final and decisive answer at once, but that he would write to them in the course of a few days."

"Deliberation on such a matter in a man of Sir Geoffrey's temperament does not argue well for the success of those speculating gentry," said the rector. "One would scarcely imagine that a man by nature so impulsive would be inclined to deliberate over even matters of business."

"I think that in this instance, at all events, the result of his deliberations will be to prohibit his friend from embarking in the project which Mr. Vane and his companion came here to advocate," said Madge. "I cannot tell you by what means, but a curious piece of information relative to this very affair has fallen into my hands. I shall lay it before Sir Geoffrey prior to his writing his decision, and I have no doubt of the way in which it will influence him."

"I hope there is no chance of—of your husband hearing of the part which you propose to take in this matter?" said the rector, nervously.

"Not the least chance in the world, I should imagine," said Madge. "But suppose he were to hear of it, what then?"

"It might induce him to be more bitter against you."

"Nothing could render him more bitter against me than the knowledge—if he ever acquired it—that I had explained to his future wife the impossibility of his legal marriage with her."

"No, but—suppose he should give up that project and repent, the knowledge of this interference on your part might aggravate him against you, and prevent his doing the justice which he otherwise would."

"Give up that project and repent! Philip Vane repenting and doing justice! My dear Mr. Drage, what can you be thinking of? You have only heard of Mr. Vane through me; and either my descriptive or your appreciative powers must be poor indeed, if you could think that such a man could be led to give up any project from which he is to derive great benefit and comfort. However, we need not discuss this matter any further; there cannot be the slightest implied connexion between me and the answer which Sir Geoffrey will send on this matter of business. As Mr. Vane has passed twenty-four hours under the same roof with me in complete ignorance of my proximity, he cannot imagine me to be in collusion with his opponent; and even if Mrs. Bendixen were to tell him of my visit to her, she could not give him any clue to my abode."

Mr. Drage said no more. He felt quite certain that if Philip Vane were to hear of his wife's interference in his business project, all hopes of the repentance and reformation which his last words seemed to convey were at an end. And Mr. Drage believed in the possibility of his arguments having produced a salutary effect. "The man's manner was so real," he said to himself. "He was evidently touched."

Meanwhile Madge, making the best of her way home, was wondering what the rector could have meant by his allusion to the possibility of Philip Vane's being induced, by any means other than threatened exposure, to give up the project on which his heart was fixed. Although Mr. Drage had talked vaguely about seeking an interview in which he would warn Philip of the iniquity of the course he was pursuing, and of the danger which awaited him if he persisted in it, Madge had no notion that the quiet, nervous invalid would have had the courage to carry his plan into effect. What he had said arose from that simplicity and want of knowledge of the world, which she had often remarked in him. Madge did not rightly estimate the depth of the mine of love in that honest heart. Since the time when she had told him of the impossibility of her ever being more to him than a friend, the rector had carefully abstained from any exhibition of his feeling for her, and she imagined that it had died away, or at least had given place to that merely brotherly regard which she was able and willing to accept.

When she reached Wheatcroft she found Sir Geoffrey engaged in his favourite occupation of superintending the gardeners, and driving them to desperation by the conflicting suggestions which he made, and impossible orders which he desired carried out. The old general looked up as she approached, and at once advanced to meet her.

"Good morning, Mrs. Pickering," he said. "You were early astir this morning. I went to your room after breakfast, but found you already flown. So I came out here to give a few directions as to the manner in which I wish this compound laid out by next summer. There is nothing which refreshes me so much after muddling my head with complicated details of business, as to undertake a little landscape gardening, in which, I flatter myself, I have excellent taste."

Madge, to whom the gardeners were constantly appealing when hopelessly involved by their master's contradictory in-

structions, thought it better not to touch upon the latter portion of this speech, so she said: "And your business matters are now, I trust, satisfactorily disposed of, Sir Geoffry?"

"I hope so—I think so. I have pretty well made up my mind upon the course which I shall recommend to Mr. Irving, though I have not written either to him or to those gentlemen who have just left us."

"And that course is——?"

"To decline to have anything to do with the affair."

"I am glad of that," said Madge, earnestly, "I am very glad of that!"

"Indeed!" said the old general, looking at her knowingly. "Is your knowledge of the Terra del Fuegos Mining Company somewhat greater than that merely obtainable from my casual mention of it, or from reading out to me the variation in its shares as reported in the City article?"

"My knowledge of the Company is absolutely nil," said Madge, quietly, "but I am glad to find that you are going to dissuade your friend from entering what might prove at least a questionable speculation. Mr. Irving is a very rich man, I have heard you say, and no longer a young one. It is better in his old age that he should keep his riches—and his friends."

"Very neatly put, Mrs. Pickering," said Sir Geoffry, with a laugh, "though I do not think Alec Irving would be likely to break with me, even though he lost money by following my advice. Our intimacy is of too long standing, and my recommendations hitherto have proved too successful for him to dream of that. However, in this matter there was a very large sum of money involved, and, as you say, it is better for him to keep what he has. There is nothing that one grows so fond of as wealth; a poorer man would stand the loss with far more equanimity."

"Your recent guests will not be pleased at your decision," said Madge, watching him attentively.

"Then they must be displeased, my dear Mrs. Pickering," said the general. "I have treated them with every courtesy and given them all they wanted, except my friend's money. And at one time, by Jove, they were very nearly getting that."

"They pleaded their cause well, then?"

"They did, indeed. So well, that if I had not happily induced them to let me have the papers last night—I sat up reading them until daybreak, and am horribly fatigued in consequence—they would probably have succeeded in inducing me to

recommend their venture to Irving's consideration. They are two remarkably clever fellows; the younger man especially Mr. Vane argued with immense apparent earnestness, and was wonderfully ready with his replies to all my objections."

"And you think they will accept your letter as a final decision?"

"I do not say that! The stake is too large for them to give up all hope of winning it without a further effort. I should not be surprised if one of them, probably Mr. Vane, were to come down here again with more persuasive talk and more promising documents; but it will be useless, my mind is made up."

"He surely would not come without apprising you?" asked Madge, in agitation.

"And even were he to do so," said the general, with a smile, "your arrangements for the domestic comforts of this house are always so complete, my dear Mrs. Pickering, that we could risk being taken un-awares."

"Oh, yes of course, everything could be made ready for a visitor in a very few moments. It was scarcely with that idea that I asked. However," added Madge, disjunctedly, "that will do when Mr. Vane arrives. Now, if you do not require me further, Sir Geoffry, I have my duties to attend to."

"Very strange woman that," muttered the old general. "What has upset her, I wonder! She can't have been speculating with her savings, and investing in this mine? Of course not. It must be that she did not like being taken aback, and wanted everything proper and orderly by any unexpected arrival. She's not without pride either, as she proved by begging to be allowed to keep out of sight during the time of those fellows' visit. Didn't like to be recognised as the housekeeper, I suppose. Strange that, and unlike her way in general. But all women are strange, I have noticed, and the less one has to do with them the better."

The housekeeping duties which had formed Madge's excuse for quitting the general did not immediately engross her attention. She went straight to her sitting-room in anything but a peaceful frame of mind, and threw herself into a chair to cogitate over the announcement which had been just made to her. From what Sir Geoffry had said, there was a chance that on any day, without warning, Philip Vane might come down to Wheatecroft to pass another twenty-four hours as a guest be-

neath its roof. In that case she would have no opportunity of taking the precaution to absent herself, or to secure herself against all chances of being accidentally brought into his presence. And there was every probability of their meeting face to face, and meeting under circumstances which would preclude any explanation on her part of how she happened to be there. She had noticed that Sir Geoffry had been scanning her curiously during the whole of their recent conversation, and she feared that if she were again to request permission to remain in seclusion during the visitors' stay, his evident suspicion might take some more definite shape. She must for the present, she thought, leave her actions to be decided by the circumstances as they arose. Her tact, her luck, let it be called what it might, had never deserted her yet, and she would trust to its promptings on the emergency.

As she rose from her seat, she was surprised at the sight of a letter lying on the table. She had been away from the house at the time of the postman's arrival, and on her first return to her room her mind had been too much occupied to allow her to think of anything but the subject which immediately engrossed her attention.

The letter was from Rose. Madge recognised that at once by its shape and size, though on taking it up she noticed that the handwriting, usually so round and clerkly, was tremulous and hurried. The word "immediate," twice underscored, was also on the superscription, so that Madge, alarmed, hurriedly broke open the envelope, and fearing that her sister was ill or unhappy, hurried through the contents. They were as follows:

DEAREST MADGE,—I don't mind telling you that I was a good deal annoyed when I received your answer to my last, saying that you could not either meet me at some nice seaside place as I proposed, where we might spend my holiday together, or that you would not allow me to come down to Springside and see as much of you as you could manage. I was annoyed, dear, because I have been for ever such a time longing to be with you, and to talk to you, and because it seemed so hard that you should merely tell me "you could not," and "you could not," without going into any explanation. I know you think that my stock of common sense is not very large, and I myself am ready to admit the fact, only I don't like having it pointed out to me quite so plainly.

However, I know that everything you do always somehow turns out for the best, and so it happened in this instance. If I had come away from London, as I proposed to do, I might not have heard something—two things really—which may be of the very greatest importance to me—I mean to us. When I say "us," of course you will understand, from what I wrote to you in my last letter, that I mean to Gerald and myself! Oh, Madge! I can scarcely tell you the extraordinary things that have happened, the wonderful discovery which I have made. I don't know exactly how to begin to tell it; I know that properly I ought to keep my great secret for the last, but then, perhaps, you wouldn't have patience to read so far, so that I had better blurt it out at once.

Well, then, you must know that the old gentleman in whose house you are living, your master I suppose I must call him—don't be annoyed, Madge, you know I wouldn't pain you, but I am so bad at explaining these things—Sir Geoffry Heriot, that is the best way to put it, is Gerald's father. Fancy that, Madge; fancy your living in the same house with that old man, seeing him every day, ordering his dinner, and that kind of thing, and not having the least idea that he was Gerald's father. He seems to be a very horrid old person, with a most abominable temper. Not that Gerald will allow this for a moment, but I am sure it must be so from what he tells me about him. You know, Madge, we always fancied at Wexeter that Gerald was a gentleman's son, and that he had run away from home, and this appears to be the case. When he was quite a lad, just before he came to old Dobson's theatre, he had a terrible quarrel with his father, who treated him most shamefully, and turned him out of the house. I do not quite understand what the quarrel was about, but I am certain Gerald was in the right.

The one thing which I remember in this story is, that Sir Geoffry had quarrelled with his wife as well as his son, and was infuriated against Gerald because he took his mother's part. It seems that Sir Geoffry, in early life, brought some terrible accusation against his wife, an accusation which Gerald, when he heard of it, imagined to be false, and was determined to disprove. He intended to devote all his time to solving this mystery, but he had his living to get, poor fellow! He had scarcely any leisure when at Wexeter, and what he had, he said, he employed in a different way. Why did Gerald blush

when he said that, Madge? I don't think he was in love with me when we were in Miss Cave's lodgings; but he did blush, and looked quite strange when he mentioned it.

However, he did find it out; and now comes the extraordinary part of the story. He discovered that his father had been deceived, and had acted with the greatest injustice towards his mother; and in his old impulsive way, which I dare say you will recollect, Madge, he determined on starting off at once to see Sir Geoffry, and to lay before him the facts which he had learned. And he went! Without saying a word to me he hurried off to Springside, and actually made his way to Wheatroft. Fancy that, Madge! Fancy Gerald being actually in the same house with you, and neither of you knowing anything about it. Of course I didn't then know who his father was; he only took me into his confidence on his return, or I should have told him about your being there.

It seems to have been a dreadful business, Madge. Sir Geoffry flew into a towering passion directly he saw him. Would not listen to a word he had to say, and actually ordered the servant to turn him out of the house. It seems too dreadful to think of, after all Gerald's patience and suffering, to receive such cruel treatment from his own father! It was an awful shock to him. Since his return he seems quite a changed man. He has lost all that fire and energy which I dare say you will remember as characteristic of him, and does nothing but brood over the wrongs he has received. More keenly than anything he seems to feel the injustice which Sir Geoffry does him in suspecting that he had merely invented the discovery of his mother's innocence as a means to restore himself to his old position and his father's favour. If Sir Geoffry could only be brought to acknowledge how wrong that suspicion is, I am sure that half Gerald's misery would disappear.

And Sir Geoffry must be brought to acknowledge it, and a reconciliation must be effected between father and son, and, what is more, all this must be done by you, Madge! Yes, by you! I have not told Gerald one word about your being at Wheatroft; I thought it better not. So that whatever is done will come upon him as a surprise. I will not attempt for an instant to suggest what you should

do. Your clear head and common sense are sure to prompt the proper course, but the result must be, Sir Geoffry's acceptance of his wife's innocence, and Gerald's restoration to his home.

You can do this, Madge, and I know you will! You would have exerted yourself in any case, but you will exert yourself more than ever now, for one reason which I have kept till the last. I told you that I was madly in love with Gerald, but that he did not make love to me. Now, Madge, he has asked me to be his wife. He first spoke to me before that dreadful visit to Wheatroft. Since his return he has asked me again. He wishes us to be married, he said, and to commence our new life in some foreign country. But I would not have him go away while matters remain as they are between him and his father. Now you see the importance of the task I have intrusted to you, and you will throw your whole heart into it, I know.

Your loving  
ROSE.

A pang shot through Madge's heart as she read the concluding lines of this letter.

"Gerald about to be married—and to Rose," she said, dreamily, letting the letter drop from her hand. Then rose up before her mental vision the old crescent at Wexeter, round which she and Gerald Hardinge had walked on that well-remembered night. His words rung again in her ears. "You know how I love and worship you, my darling! How, since the first hour I saw you, I have been your slave, never happy but when near you, and having no other thought but of and for you."

And now he was going to be married to Rose! Madge bent her head upon her breast, and her muttered words, "I suppose it is all for the best," sounded very hopelessly.

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